

RICHARD HERBERT

Oral History: EDITED VERSION

Birth Date: September 5, 1905 (original name: Rachiel Hanna)

Interview EI-404 by Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., October 29, 1993.

Immigrated from Blaouza, Lebanon at the age of eight.

Left from the port in Marseilles, France on the *Argentina* and arrived August 30, 1913.

**Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along.
Then discuss the answers in your group.**

*Your dramatic skit will focus more on **Richard's mother** than on Richard himself.*

SIGRIST: Mr. Herbert came from Blaouza [BLAU-zuh], Lebanon, in 1913 when he was eight years old. Mr. Herbert, can you describe the town for me, please?

HERBERT: Farm. You wouldn't call it a town. Just farm. Farms were about two to three miles apart. What you found green, you ate it. Mostly you lived, in them days, like everybody else. Nobody had any money. There was no work. You worked you own land... the buildings were stone, one room, and you lived like your forefathers lived.

SIGRIST: So it was primitive living.

HERBERT: Primitive living. They did the same living as the forefathers did—worked their gardens, worked their land and produced enough for them to eat, and have some food for the winter. They were still living like they did in the biblical days. The cities were progressing a little bit better than they did up on the hills, up on the mountains [where his family lived]. There was no shower to take, no water in the house. I'd say it was like a barn, you know? No equipment, no stove. You had a fireplace in the middle of the house. That's where you got the heat in the wintertime. Smoke, all through the house. Don't open the door, don't leave the heat go out.

SIGRIST: Did you raise any animals?

HERBERT: Yes. You had a cow for milk, you had a couple of nanny goats. If you were fortunate enough to have money to buy a couple of sheep so that you could slaughter them and have meat for the winter, you were all right. If you were fortunate enough to have a few chickens, you killed one every time you felt like having chicken. You ate the same food day in and day out. Yogurt, they make yogurt out of cow's milk. You lived on that, and bread. If you didn't eat what she put in the dish for you, that's your breakfast the next day. [He laughs.] Because they don't throw it away.

SIGRIST: Could either of your parents read and write?

HERBERT: No. There's no education. There was no compulsory [law] to go to school. They couldn't get no teachers. Who wants to work for nothing? But my mother was a nun. She was four years in the convent. She had a little, a little schooling.

SIGRIST: Do you remember something you did for fun? A game, or . . .

HERBERT: There was no games. You might take a stick and scratch the dirt here and there, but that's the way you lived, yeah. But as far as toys and all that, and books to read, and your mother there reading you a story, that wasn't known of in them days.

Describe how people lived in the mountains of northern Lebanon.

How did the children play?

My mother came here in 1896, before I was born. In them days when they came to this country, they didn't come here to stay. They came here to make a few dollars and better their lives and [then return home to Lebanon].

SIGRIST: Was she married when she came in 1896?

HERBERT: Yes, she had four children. Left the kids. The husband, too. Because he was connected with the patriarch—the patriarch is a high priest, high bishop—and the patriarch had told him that he will take him to heaven with him when he goes, so he devoted most of his time and life with the patriarch.

SIGRIST: When she came to America, did she have family that was already over here?

HERBERT: She had an uncle. That was the year some [migrant workers] came from the mountains of Lebanon. They came in 1880. They'd start making money, [then] going back and improving their lives. Different families used to write back how good it is here.

[The uncle] had a little clothing store that he used to sell [clothing goods] to the peddlers. In them days they used to peddle pack on the back, take a hundred dollars worth [of clothing], he'd trust them, they'd go out and sell it. When they came back, they paid for that order, and then he would give them another order to go peddle some more.

Well, she came in 1896 and worked peddling pack on the back. Some months she would walk a hundred miles, farm roads. My mother had walked from North Adams, Massachusetts, to Berry, Vermont. This is about 176 miles. She made it in six months, peddling from one side of the road to the other, and [sleeping] overnight in [someone's] barn or house. She came [to America three times]—in 1896, 1907 and 1913.

SIGRIST: What did she tell you about those early days in America when she was here?

HERBERT: They knew just a little English, like ten cents, five cents. And good morning, or good night. Then gradually they had to learn a little bit of English, so they did.

Why did Richard's mother come to the US without her husband or children?

Why didn't these early Lebanese workers stay in the U.S.?

They didn't believe in paper money in them days. [In America she] used to get five dollar gold pieces. Well, when she [returned to Lebanon], she took a tomato can full of them five dollar gold pieces, about five thousand dollars. In four years, five years, you made five thousand dollars. [After she returned to Lebanon] in 1898, or '99, she had four more children, and she lost three. Then she came back to America.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever talk about that experience?

HERBERT: Oh, many times. One [of her sons] was eleven years old. He was sleeping with my father up on the roof, the flat roof. [The roof] didn't have no guard rail. So it started to rain one night, and my mother rushed up to tell my father it's going to start raining. And [while] he packed up the quilts, the pillows, the boy rolled over and down onto a ledge and he got killed there.

Another one, the daughter was about seven or eight years old, she got pneumonia. There was no doctors, no hospitals. So she was burning inside [with fever]. My father had a little stand that had some anise [an alcoholic drink made from seeds]. She thought it was water, and she drank some, and with the pneumonia, she died. [Another brother dies also.]

She heard here in this country that World War I was coming on. And she rushed to get her five children [out of Lebanon]. She begged my father to come with her to America, where life is much better. You could live a happy life. [But] He was connected with the patriarch, and the patriarch had told him that he will take him to heaven with him when he goes, so he devoted most of his time and life with the patriarch.

What was the father's role in the death of two of the children?

Why did the father want to stay in Lebanon?

She had been sleeping right alongside my father when she got up at twelve o'clock. I've often heard her say it was, say that that was the most brightest moonlight night that she ever witnessed in Lebanon. So, sure enough, twelve o'clock at night, she woke up the [three children]. And then she put us at the end of that terrace, and she went back to get the money. She had it secreted in the garden. She took it out before dark and put it in the pantry where my father wouldn't see it. So when she went back there to get the money she was fishing around the pantry and the pan fell down [and made a noise].

So she got the money, and she ran, and we had to travel through "beast valley." Coyotes, you name it, and there is it down in that valley. But [his] oldest brother, fourteen years old, she gave him a club, and she told him, "Any beast, anything come, you hit him." I was eight years old,

and my brother was six years old. She had to carry him a distance of about five miles, up the mountains. Not a road, and not a cow path, through the woods.

[They stop at the house of his mother's friend from America. She looks out for any passing coaches—horse-drawn buggies—that might take her to her next stop.] Sure enough, there was a coachman [with] two priests that he was taking to the next village. She stopped [him] and she says, "On your way back, will you pick me up and take me to Tripoli?" And she gives him two liras, that's ten dollars. That coachman, many times he worked a whole year and didn't make ten dollars. So he went maybe half a mile and ditched them. He [came] right back, picked us up.

In the meantime, my father and his brother [were] looking for us, because my father knew that she's running away. She saw them through the window, waiting for the coachman to come by. My father and his brother stopped at the provincial police barracks, and they asked [the police] if they had seen a woman with five children come by here. They said no, but he said, "If you do, you hold them here." So on the way going to Tripoli, they stopped her. She got out [of the coach], and she went inside the little [police] shed and she told them her story, and she gave each one of them a five dollar gold piece. That was a year's pay. So they said to her, "Go, and God be with you."

Now, she gets to Tripoli, to one of her cousins that lived in Tripoli to put us up, because we hadn't slept all night. She [had] already spoke[n] to the woman that she's coming. We weren't there maybe two hours [when] her cousin said to her, "Your husband and his brother were looking for you. You'd better get out of town." They were really mad. [She finds another coachman to take the family to Beirut.]

When she got to Beirut, she saw a lawyer, [who] told her, "I'm not going to send you on that boat that's coming in here two weeks from today, because your husband is going to be on that boat looking for you. I'm going to send you on [a cargo ship] to Patras, Greece. There you will pick the ship [to the U.S.]." When she went to pay him he said to her, "No, you don't." So he calls up, no, there was no phone. I guess he walked down to the dry docks, and he met the captain of the ship, and [bribed him]. [The ship was] not supposed to take any passengers, only shipping, like wheat, flour.

What personality skills did his mother use to sneak her children out of the country?

What dangers did they face on the journey?

[From Greece they sailed to] Marseilles, France. So when she got to Marseilles, France, we had to wait I think one whole week [for] the next boat...to Ellis Island, to America. [He pauses.] It was pretty sad, for a woman with five children, but she had enough money to know how to bribe and get to where she's going.

SIGRIST: We've gotten a good sense of what your mother's personality was like.

HERBERT: Yes. She was one of the most courageous women that I ever heard of. I don't remember my father because, in them days, you were on your own when you were a year old. You lived like the nannygoats [female goats] did. Whatever you saw green, you ate it. And I've got to tell you, you begin to get used to it. You're half animal after living that way. But, [his mother] had the foresight. That wasn't the life to live, in Lebanon.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the voyage was from France to New York?

HERBERT: One month. When anybody died on the boat they used to wrap them up in a canvas, [with] a good, heavy piece of steel railing with [the body], so that when they'd drop them off, they'd go down to the bottom, and they wouldn't be floating on top.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

HERBERT: On the floor. What do you mean, bed? No such thing. The ship had three floors. If you paid fifty [dollars] you're down below, where the cows are, where they used to carry to slaughter to feed the passengers. [NOTE: This detail is in dispute by historians.]

I can remember that, that will never go out of my mind, when we heard that we're going to be landing in New York tomorrow morning six o'clock. And it seemed that everybody on that ship was to the front of the ship trying to get the first look at the Statue of Liberty. Well, it was a beautiful, a beautiful feeling.

On the ship to America, what sight did everyone want to see?

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being at Ellis Island?

HERBERT: Ellis Island, I used to hear them say, I learned that later what [they were saying], "Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving." And you had a tag on you that says where you're going, your name, and where you're going. They put a tag on you, like a tag on a bag of potatoes. And it was, "Keep on moving."

My mother, when she came to Ellis Island, she was detained there for one whole month, because somebody had to go down...to sponsor her, so that she wouldn't be a burden to the state. So she had to wait a whole month until my uncle, who was going to New York to do his buying, he would stop in and get us out.

When her uncle came down, I do remember [from his mother] that there was three judges sitting there. [NOTE: He is describing a Board of Special Inquiry.] They asked him, "How can you support this family?" He said, "I can support a hundred families. I've got a little clothing store. I've got a little farm and I go out peddling my fruit and my vegetables, and we're getting along beautifully. And her children, in a couple of years they'll be old enough to go to work." Because in them days you went to work at fourteen. You had to quit school in order to make a living. So

there was compulsory [education until the age of fourteen]. When you got to fourteen years old, you can quit.

SIGRIST: What recollections do you have of being at Ellis Island?

HERBERT: For breakfast they served three, two boiled eggs, and biscuits, and coffee or tea. The food was much better than the food I was getting when I was growing up.

SIGRIST: Were you staying with your mother somewhere, or were you in separate . . .

HERBERT: No, no. One room, one room. Uh, I think they brought in, uh, day beds into that room, about half the size of this big room here, and we stayed there until.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything at Ellis Island that you had never seen before?

HERBERT: Everything at Ellis Island I had never seen before, everything. There were beautiful buildings in them days, and, uh, there were people from all over the world coming to Ellis Island. They kept flocking in, coming to America. In them days, you've got to be examined by I don't know how many doctors, and if one is not fit to come into this country, you had to send them back, and that's what she feared. She prayed day and night that every one of us would [get into the US]. When she heard that judge say to my uncle, "Take them," she was relieved like you can't imagine. But there was fear.

her uncle to get the family off Ellis Island? What did the uncle have to swear to do?

What did his mother fear?

SIGRIST: So [your father] gave up pursuing your mother. He never made it to America.

HERBERT: He didn't have any money and, uh, he couldn't come anyways. I have to say that. Because he lost one eye. They were dragging a gristmill stone where they grind the [flour?], from one town to another, and he was at the end of the rope, and I guess the rope hit him [in the eye], and he couldn't see [out of] one eye. I don't think that he could have came. Because you had to be one hundred percent fit to come into America.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw New York City?

HERBERT: Like coming from hell into heaven. She knew how to get around New York, because she came to New York three times before. She was courageous. And she was bright. She had to be courageous in order to do what she did.

SIGRIST: Tell me about how your mother went about making a living.

HERBERT: She couldn't do peddling because she had to go far out, like five miles, ten miles. She couldn't come back and take care of her kids. So she got a job in the sweat shop, [the] cotton

mill, nine dollars a week. And out of that nine dollars, she had to pay three dollars a week [for] rent, twelve dollars a month. They paid rent by the week in them days. So she had six dollars to live on. What do you mean, doctor, in them days? She was the doctor. You got a toothache? She'd burn a needle and kill the nerve in your tooth and you were all set. No such thing as going to a doctor.

SIGRIST: Tell me about starting school and what that experience was like?

HERBERT: I loved the first day, being with a lot of kids, [because in Lebanon] you played with no other kids other than your brothers and sisters back home...It was thrilling to be with kids and everybody's jumping rope, everybody's playing ball.

It didn't take me too long to learn the language. There was no more speaking Lebanese. It was all English. Listen to all other kids. You had to learn. Within a month or two, I patted it down, yeah. Naturally you would learn the bad word.

SIGRIST: Do you remember experiencing any kind of prejudice as an immigrant?

HERBERT: The Italians used to call us Turks, because Turkey ruled Lebanon [when Richard lived there]... Now what's happening in Lebanon is the same thing that's happening in Ireland, the Protestants against the Catholics. And the Muslims against the Catholics in Lebanon.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever want to go back to Lebanon to see her husband?

HERBERT: She didn't want any part of Lebanon any more. When I was eight years old, nine years old, she took pictures, and she sent him his ticket [to come to America], and the pictures, and a letter. The letter got there, but a few days after he gets the letter, [World War I] broke out, no communication between here and there. [After the war] My mother got a letter from her cousin, 1919, stated that my father died. He lived for six years all alone in that house. He might have died brokenhearted.

Would Richard's father have been allowed into the US? Why or why not?

How do you think the family felt about their Lebanese roots? Use Richard's words to support your answer.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **RICHARD HERBERT**

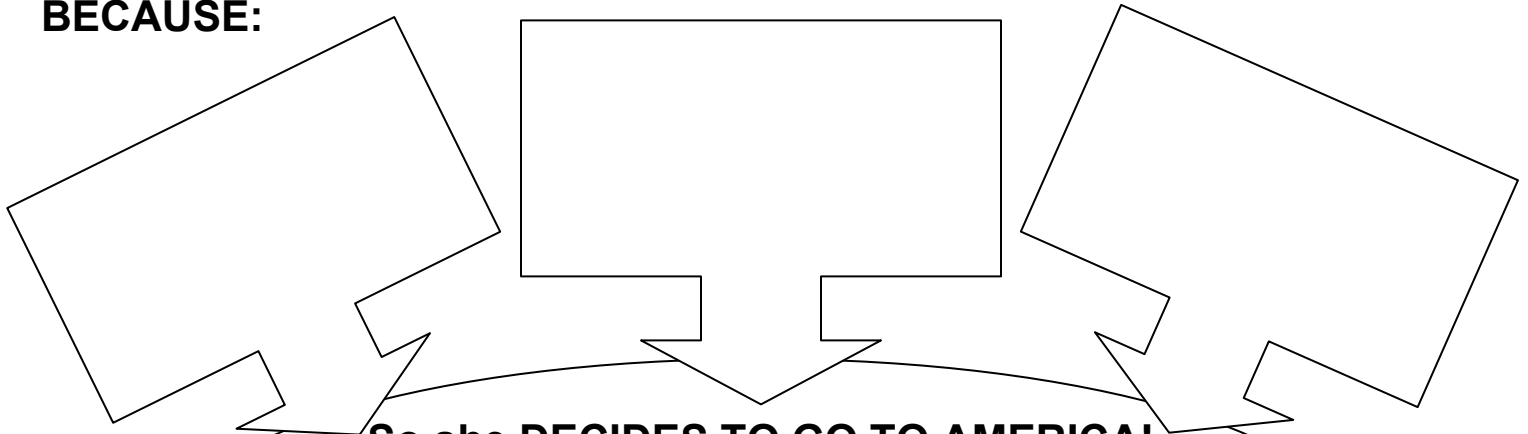
FROM: _____

YEAR he came to the US: _____

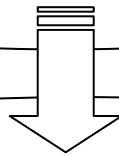
AGE upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did his mother choose to leave home and take her children to America?

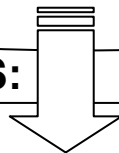
BECAUSE:



So she DECIDES TO GO TO AMERICA!
How do they get there?



Once they get to Ellis Island:



In the US:

A large, empty rectangular box intended for the student to write about their experience in the US.